Andrew McNamara and Peter Krapp

Introduction

> An intense experience must be "forgotten," "cen-
> sored," and reduced to a very cool state before it can
> be "learned" or assimilated.
> —Marshall McLuhan, "Media Hot and Cold"

The question of the medium is today almost totally subsumed within discussions of the mass media.[1] In this context, the medium is always regarded as plural and as a ubiquitous feature of everyday life in the industrialized world. The fact that the mass media constitute such a ubiquitous presence in contemporary life means the issue of *medium,* or *media,* is often thought to arise as a special issue with the advent of mass media. Yet the very issue of the medium became a central concern of modernist art practice almost a century and a half ago. The original impetus of this collection of essays was to reopen this long history of exploration and engagement. To that end, many of the essays collected here scrutinize the role of the medium in fields as diverse as modernist and contemporary art practice, the avant-garde tradition, photography, cinema, and architecture as well as in the more familiar contemporary guises of electronic media, television, and computer games.

The aim of this collection, therefore, is to explore what considerations such a diverse and long-standing commitment to media brought to our understanding of this pivotal issue. This diversity of approaches uncovers how familiar reflections of the medium remain: many of the essays in this collection touch on a continuing debate that oscillates between values of freedom and constraint. The medium is too often assumed to be a transparent phenomenon that simply transmits meaning from one place to another without delaying or transforming the intended meaning. In political discourse, transparency is an important issue because it goes together with accountability as a central tenet of democratic practice. Is it merely perverse, then, to stress "opacity" as an equally fundamental feature in examining the role of media? This collection of essays suggests not. The issue may be reworked to ask, Can one equate a democratic impetus with the inverse of transparency? Of particular interest here is the way *the visual*—in its many guises—constitutes a core feature of our media image of the world.

This collection asks, What is the status of the visual in these screen presentations? Is the mediated view of the world wholly dependent on specific ideas of what constitutes the visual—that is, the visual as direct and sensuously immediate? And what happens to the question of aura when the concept of media, of the medium, is extended and proliferates? The focus of these questions arose from a series of weekly seminars presented by Samuel Weber at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia, while a QUT Visiting Fellow in July–August 1998. This fellowship was organized by Rod Wissler, director of the Centre for Innovation in the Arts, with the assistance of Andrew McNamara and Toni Ross. The seminars explored approaches to these questions from Plato and Aristotle to the contemporary media scene, and the series rounded off with a weekend symposium, "Medium Cool," August 22–23, 1998, from which the majority of these essays derive. The symposium sought to explore the theme of the *medium* to coincide with the focus of Weber's series of seminars at QUT. Of the essays presented in this special issue, those of Keith Broadfoot, Patrick Crogan, Catherine Liu, Rosemary Hawker, John Macarthur, and Lisa Trahair accord more or less with the papers presented at the QUT symposium. Others have changed or shifted substantially in that long interlude. The essays were not intended to engage directly with Weber's work on the theme of medium, but even with the addition of contributions from European and U.S. scholars, a surprising number of the texts in this collection did find

impetus in Weber's explorations. Thus what was once an implicit engagement with Weber's ideas, particularly, *mass mediaura*, was developed into an explicit focus in drawing together a number of essays by scholars who engage directly with Weber's themes in regard to media.

In "Abstraction and Aura," Keith Broadfoot takes Weber's study and elaboration of Walter Benjamin's ideas about aura as a basis for developing an alternative understanding of modernist art practice—one that shifts the trajectory from a presumption that modern art is the natural consequence of a shift from cultic understandings of art to an ever greater emphasis on exhibition value. If, as Weber argues, aura is the name for an "undepictable *de-piction* of distancing and separation," what is it to speak of painting and aura? Looking at the work of Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, and Jasper Johns, Broadfoot presents an argument for rethinking the history of modernist painting in terms of how painting successively performs this undepictable *de-piction* of distancing and separation.

The focus of Andrew McNamara's essay is on how the scrutiny of the medium becomes essential to avant-garde practice within the visual arts and is central to its claim to maintain a radically critical regard to the general postulates of "visuality." In developing the notion of "medium-specificity," Clement Greenberg asks us to grasp art as "opaque." In response, Thierry de Duve suggests that Greenberg means that such identity is grasped in love and confrontation. McNamara ponders why art may be risked in the avant-garde venture, but not judgment (at least, as far as the critics are concerned): in love and confrontation, judgment is preferable on the side of love alone.

In "'Bright Shadows': Art, Aboriginality, and Aura," Rex Butler explores Samuel Weber's analysis of Walter Benjamin in Weber's essay, "Mass Mediauras, or: Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin" in order to understand how contemporary Aboriginal art, despite increasingly adopting the look and techniques of tourist-driven kitsch, remains profoundly auratic. It then goes on to explore the way in which the auratic work retains its mystery precisely because of the fact that it is made for us, that we are "put into the picture."

Catherine Liu traces an approach to photography as understood in terms of the family album in "Getting to the Photo Finish: Photography, Autobiography, Modernity." As a genre, the family album provokes reflection on the question of modernity, which Liu pinpoints in the intersection of photography and (or as) autobiography. Between the art photograph and the

snap shot, subtle differences engage the discourses not only of technology and aesthetics, but of history and politics as well. Liu demonstrates this meticulously in reading pictures by Alfred Stieglitz, August Sander, and Liu's immigrant father. By the same token, the speed of photography can not only expose what is invisible to the naked eye, but make visible what the rapid progress of technology tends to suppress as mere dreck—the eradication of which lies at the very heart of photography, as Gerhard Richter's use of the blur shows.

Rosemary Hawker brings a consideration of "idiom," as proposed by Jacques Derrida ("Passe Partout," *The Truth in Painting*) as well as Samuel Weber's discussion of medium theatricality to a discussion of Gerhard Richter's "photopaintings" in her essay "The Idiom in Photography As the Truth in Painting." Richter promises, in his photopaintings, to paint a photograph, as opposed to painting photographically. He does this through the use of visual traits that are idiomatic to the medium of photography, namely, photographic blur and lack of focus. What is idiomatic is what can be observed but not translated. In citing photography in painting, Richter marks out this difference for our scrutiny. For him, the idiom in photography is the truth in painting only insofar as both betray their persistence and mutability.

In "Art in the 'Post-Medium' Era: Aesthetics and Conceptualism in the Art of Jeff Wall," Toni Ross responds to the negative forecasts of the fate of aesthetics within postmodernity offered by Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. Both see the progressive commodification of culture as diminishing art's sublimating potential: that is, its ability to produce sensory signs of another order in excess of ordinary symbolic and economic exchanges. Jameson therefore judges those currently advocating a return to aesthetics as both misguided and intent on negating the critical and conceptualist legacy of post-sixties art. Examining the interplay of aesthetics and conceptualism in a work by Jeff Wall, Ross argues that his work evades a common opposition between aesthetics and conceptualism, thus maintaining a sublimating capacity for art.

Lisa Trahair takes up Weber's rereading of Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," in order to examine the role of technology in Buster Keaton's films. In so doing, she attempts to avoid the narrowly instrumental reading of Keaton's work that is common in other commentaries. Exploring the connotations of Weber's retranslating of the Heideggerian

term, *Gestell*, as "emplacement," Trahair questions the privilege of art as the special arena for reflection on technology and reads Keaton's comedic treatment of technology, causality, and instrumentalism as offering an alternative to the type of technological worldview Heidegger criticized.

In "Unforgiven: *Fausse Reconnaissance*," Peter Krapp demonstrates how certain conventions of mass media, specifically the treatment of violence and weather, offer access to what is made forgotten in the unforgiving medium of film. His reading of a Clint Eastwood movie throws into relief the disturbances of cultural memory between fiction, or a past that never was, and the instant replay of "breaking news," or an immediate present that will never have been immediate nor present.

Georg Stanitzek asks, in "Fama/Chain of Muses: Two Classical Problems of Literary Studies with 'the Media,'" why some cultural critics still harbor a certain philological resentment against "the media" and "media culture," even though—or perhaps because—the competence of media studies clearly evolved from within their ranks. His question is not simply what happens to literature in the age of television, but how two discourses about the mass media can be traced back to two ancient positions: rumor and the chain of muses. Exploiting the current between their polarity, he proceeds to switch the TV on and off with Plato and Aristotle.

Wolfgang Ernst's essay, "Between Real Time and Memory on Demand: Reflections on/of Television," excavates the early history of television in order to put on our screens how it programs today's and tomorrow's channels and contents. Advocating media archaeology as a nonhermeneutic approach, Ernst digs deep to restore a sense of the medium and its true capacity. He seeks to liberate media studies from a traditional fixation on programs as content, and to begin deciphering media and their effects as functions of programming in the sense of computer science.

Patrick Crogan analyzes the theme of interactivity, in his essay "Blade Runners: Speculations on Narrative and Interactivity," by comparing the Blade Runner computer adventure game with the classic postmodern film on which it is based. He critically examines a common assumption in discourses on new media that equates interactivity with liberation from the bonds of narrative. In critically exploring this presumption, Crogan investigates similar claims regarding interactivity made in regard to the Blade Runner game as well as in terms of a postmodern, posthuman interface.

Georg Christoph Tholen delineates how the ceaseless shifting of meta-

phors complicates the work of media studies in his essay "Media Meta-phorology: Irritations in the Epistemic Field of Media Studies." Taking up Samuel Weber's concern with "taking place," he demonstrates that the way we situate media, how we pose and ponder the question about the location of the medium, necessarily transforms the relation between concepts and metaphors of media. Once all media become digitalized and subsumed in the notion of a purported "universal medium"—the personal computer— the postdramatic mediality of the medium is performed by ghostly inter-faces and surfaces.

John Macarthur considers the role of the visual image in architecture by examining instances of contemporary architecture that include a program of applied imagery. Looking at the interplay of architecture and the visual art, Macarthur surprises the reader by developing some key insights about the nature of the architectural medium. He argues that architects such as Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron use images as the material for an architectural work in the same manner that another architect might select glass or steel. At stake in such architectural work are both the techniques for working with images at the level of their materiality and the intermedi-ary space of the visual. Furthermore, Macarthur contrasts the general phe-nomenology implied by "visual cultures" with the material and historical variability that has been envisaged in art and architecture.

Two contributions appear from Samuel Weber. One is an interview that deals with many principal themes in Weber's work, particularly his focus on media and the medium. The other develops some of the same concerns in a meditation on the events of September 11, including its media fallout, which Weber reads as part and parcel of the terrorist attacks. He explores their interaction by showing how spectacle is intrinsic to both the "War against Terrorism" and the acts of terrorism. For Weber, this confluence in a highly ambivalent media spectacle marks a truly significant aspect of "9/11."

Although arguably "in the jumbo jet, media are more densely connected than in most places," they remain divided into two areas of competence. Computers, radar, diode displays, radio beacons, nonpublic channels are at the disposal of a necessarily interactive crew, while passengers are restricted to audio tape, film, and airline "cuisine"—one-way consumption, with the notable exception of the in-flight telephone.[2] To different degrees, then, one may opt to be partially disconnected from the experience of flight by canned media, or one may attempt to brave the tasks of navigation and service with

multiple connections. This amassing of all media in one place can deliver any message—even the final message that is the bomb. Yet to passengers and crew, and by extension to all of us living in media society, the direction our sensurround takes us is not always evident.

Attention to such contexts allows for an inquiry into "the media" as a quest to circumscribe a discourse without author: a discourse that no longer advertises its desire, following different and diffuse rules of sending and receiving. Beyond communicating one-to-one, one-to-many, or even many-to-one, the logic of the media transforms the context of observation into a network of "many-to-many." In this way, technical media become suspect precisely because they have, or because they are, power—and because their power is ubiquitous and inescapable. To gain perspective on them, to interpret them, one cannot simply travel or relocate, run away or hide. There is no source, no center, no origin to the network that ceaselessly circulates, reproduces, and amplifies information. Thus to seek understanding, to halt and interpret, to read and communicate competently may become possible only if the observation of media structures, and media effects, is organized by a heightened attention to one's own situation in observing, in the sense that one remains suspicious of suspicions.[3] Media studies would momentarily suspend the sensurround: and it is this mode of interruption that gives rise to the insights of media studies, to a medium's readability, citability, to the stutter of paraphrases. In exploring "what it means to be *situated* in and by a world organized by 'the media,'" Weber suggests "nothing more or less than acknowledging what has probably always obtained: that we only take place, from time to time, between places rather than in them, in the instant of an intervening interval."[4]

Notes

1 The quotation by Marshall McLuhan that opens this introduction is from McLuhan, "Media Hot and Cold," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 32.

2 Friedrich Kittler's remarks regarding the airline industry can be found in the first translation of his preface to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). This version appeared in *October* 41 (1987): 101–18, and was reprinted in Friedrich Kittler, *Literature Media Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 28–49; quotation from 32. Inexplicably, however, this paragraph is missing from the translation of the entire book (2).

3 Samuel M. Weber, "Fellowship," *Grosz/Jung/Grosz*, ed. Günter Bose and Erich Brink-

mann (Berlin: Brinkmann and Bose, 1980), 159–72. See also Weber's introduction to his influential 1973 German edition of Schreber's memoirs, translated in Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), vii–liv, which in turn has had a profound influence on media studies in general and scholars such as Kittler in particular.

4   Samuel M. Weber, "'Between a Human Life and a Word': Benjamin's Excitable Gestures," in *Mediatized Drama, Dramatized Media*, ed. Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Trier: WVT, 2000), 15–30; quotation from 30.